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Transfiguration • 2 Corinthians 3:12–13 (14–18); 4:1–6 • February 15, 2015

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Literary Context

The text is part of the section of 2 Corinthians where Paul is defending the integrity of his apostolic ministry and his past actions in dealing with the believers in Corinth (1:12–7:16). In the section immediately preceding today's text, 3:7–11, Paul contrasts the ministry of Moses in mediating the Torah to Israel to Paul's own apostolic ministry of proclaiming the lordship of Jesus Christ. Both ministries are characterized by glory, but where Moses's ministry was a ministry of death (3:7), Paul's is a ministry of the Spirit (3:8). Where Moses's ministry was a ministry of condemnation, Paul's is a ministry of righteousness (3:9). Where the old covenant mediated by Moses is being abolished and superseded, the ministry of the gospel of Jesus will remain forever (3:11). The reader/hearer should thus appreciate being a recipient of the new covenant as proclaimed by Paul.

The Text

Verses 3:12–13: The "hope" (ἐλπίδα) to which Paul refers in 3:12 is the hope in the enduring/remaining glory mentioned in the previous sentence (3:11). This is the glory associated with the new covenant. This hope motivates Paul to behave very boldly/frankly/openly (παρρησίᾳ) in his ministry. Paul then contrasts his conduct with Moses's wearing the veil as described in Exodus 34. Commentators do not agree on the particular point Paul is making about Moses's purpose in wearing the veil. One explanation is that it was to hide from the people how the glory would gradually dissipate from Moses's face, and then that Paul is suggesting a connection between this and the impermanence of the old covenant. Whatever the purpose of the veil, Paul argues that Moses's wearing the veil implies that he was concealing something and so it contrasts with Paul's own openness.

Verses 3:14–18: Paul next uses the figure of the veil to discuss Israel's present unbelief. As the people of Israel could not see Moses's face because of the veil, so

their minds remain hardened and a veil covers their hearts today as they hear the old covenant read. Only in Christ is this veil abolished (3:14) and only in repentance is it removed (3:15). *Note Paul's important hermeneutical point that apart from faith in Jesus Christ there can ultimately be no proper understanding of the Torah.*

Verses 4:1–6: Paul continues defending his apostolic ministry in terms of its openness: Paul has “renounced the disgraceful secret ways” and refuses to “act with deceit” or to “falsify the word of God”; he instead commends himself by the open manifestation of the truth (4:2). He does not preach himself, but Jesus as Lord and him, Paul, as his servant (4:5). Throughout this pericope Jesus’s lordship has this important implication: God’s people are now led by the Spirit and so are no longer obliged to live under the letter of the Torah. Because Jesus is Lord, the old covenant is no longer in effect.

Paul again uses the imagery of the “veil” to explain unbelief: Those on the road to condemnation are blinded by the god of this age and so do not see the glory of Christ, who is the image of God (4:3–4). The solution for such “blindness” is in the open proclamation of Jesus Christ through which “light would shine out in darkness to affect enlightenment” (4:6).

Considerations for Preaching

1. Paul discusses the cause of unbelief with the image of “the veil,” an image where faith is likened to seeing and so unbelief is blindness. The proclamation of Jesus then functions to remove the veil and to enlighten the darkness—and thus enabling the blind to see. Because of this Paul stresses the importance of conducting his ministry with openness/boldness. What is (and should be) openly proclaimed is that Jesus Christ is Lord. He has initiated God’s reign of salvation on earth and will bring this work to completion on the last day. Those who believe in Jesus receive the Holy Spirit, are given the hope of eternal life, and are justified before God the Father.

2. As Paul uses this image of the veil to describe what happens with unbelievers when they hear God’s word, this image should not be directly applied to believers today as if they are still impeded by such a veil. *Rather they are those who have been saved from such unbelief through the proclamation of Jesus Christ and the ministry of the Holy Spirit.* This last point is good news for those who believe and should be preached this way.

3. Paul’s apostolic ministry found its motivation in the eschatological hope of the permanent and enduring glory. This “glory” was initiated already in Jesus’s ministry. It is manifested in part today in the work of the Holy Spirit among God’s people. This hope will ultimately be fulfilled when Jesus makes all things new on the last day. And so it is while we are mindful of the end goal that we are called to be faithful to the gospel today.

4. Unfaithful ministry is characterized by the use of deceit, cunning, and twisting the word of God to attract a following, sometimes then with the goal of promoting the (so-called) ministers rather than devotion to Jesus Christ. Faithful believers should be warned against such “ministers” and “ministries.” Paul proclaimed Jesus as Lord not for profit, power, or self-interest, but for the enlightenment and salvation of those who hear.

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